

Must we choose between saving the planet and exiting the crisis?

By [Xavier Timbeau](#)

It is up to our generation and those that follow to find a way for 10 billion people to live decently and sustainably on a planet with finite resources and capacities. As a decent standard of living requires a mode of consumption closer to that of our Western societies than the deprivation that afflicts a large part of the world's inhabitants, the task is immense – but failure is unacceptable. All this requires us to curb climate change, to anticipate falling agricultural yields, to prepare for the impact of rising sea levels, to adapt, and to halt the destruction of biomass and biodiversity while taking into account the depletion of natural resources, whether renewable or not. The list of constraints is long, and unfortunately it does not stop with these few examples (the interested reader can profit from reading the [OFCE's previous work](#) on this subject).

Yet the crisis facing the developed countries ([the Great Recession](#)) is often put in opposition to the environmental emergency, suggesting that any ethical concern for integrating human society into the limits imposed by the environment is a luxury that we can no longer afford. As we are obliged either to hope for a return to growth or to prepare the liquidation of our economies, *décroissance*, or de-growth, out of a concern for nature would be an idle fantasy, an option that only the most idealistic – and thus someone freed from the constraints of reality – could take “seriously”. How could societies that are experiencing record rates of unemployment, which need to get back to work in order to absorb the excesses of yesteryear (!), societies threatened moreover by emerging powers that

will hasten the decline of anyone who fails to comply with the rules of the new world – how could they allow themselves to become absorbed in saving the planet?

The idea that these two priorities (ending the crisis, saving the planet) have themselves to be prioritized (one realistic, the other idealistic) is a very poor way of addressing the challenge of our times. It can only lead to bad policies, to increasing the future cost of the environmental realism so necessary today and prolonging the economic crisis we are going through again and again. Three arguments are often advanced that lead to neglecting environmental issues in favour of economic issues. These arguments are especially questionable.

The first argument is that the solution to the environmental issue has to be postponed – but it can't be. Indeed, and as an example, the capacity of the global ecosystem to absorb carbon dioxide has long been exceeded. Continuing to emit carbon because oil is cheaper than other energy sources [\[1\]](#) on the pretext that there is no other choice is a dead end. Every time a gas plant is built (shale or not), it has to be worked (to be profitable) at least 50 years. But after 10 years we will take fright at the level of carbon emissions and realize that climate change is threatening not just our comfort, but the very survival of the human species, and it will be obvious that we must reduce CO₂ emissions. So in addition to new investments to change the way we consume energy, it will then be necessary to add the scrapping of the still-unprofitable gas plant. Putting off doing what is needed does not save money – on the contrary, it increases the cost, simply because the environmental constraints cannot be put off. This is currently the diagnosis, for example, even of the [International Energy Agency](#), hardly a den of hard-core ecologists. To stop the planet's climate from heating up by more than 2°C (relative to the pre-industrial era), it is necessary to immediately take the path of reducing CO₂

emissions by around 2t of CO₂ per year per capita (down to 5 to 10 times less than current emissions in the developed countries). Not doing this today means investing in poor solutions that will have to be mothballed before they have become profitable, and resigning ourselves to limiting the increase in the planet's temperature to 3°C or even more. It therefore means paying more for a worse level of climate stabilization that will then cost even more to adapt. Making the reduction of public debt the priority on behalf of future generations is completely hypocritical if it is done at the expense of future generations. In other words, investing in the decarbonisation of the economy, if it is done well, would have a future social profitability well above interest rates on the public debt. Not doing this means impoverishing future generations. Not doing this because cash constraints prohibit it amounts to a denial that we will not be able to justify to future generations.

The second argument is that we are not rich enough to be able to save the planet. Complying with environmental requirements and implementing solutions to reduce our impact on the environment would impoverish us, with very few exceptions, at least at first [2]. What was once cheap (e.g. producing energy with reserves accumulated underground over millions of years) would now be done with more work and more infrastructure or capital (and thus more work to produce the capital), and thus in a way that is generally less efficient. Designing products that can be recycled completely, and producing and recycling them so that the materials that compose them can be *indefinitely* reused so as not to tap into the stock of the planet's finite resources, will require more work, more energy (and thus more work) and more capital (and thus more work). Choosing to take the path of respect for the environment thus means less consumption (final consumption, or, if you prefer, fewer services from consumption or a decrease in the flow of material well-being drawn from consumption). But that does not mean a decline in production, or even less a decline in

domestic production. Greater concern for the environment will mean a fall in productivity and living standards, but it will also mean job creation (this is the simple corollary). But what happens when jobs are created by reducing productivity in a situation of massive underemployment? It may, though this is not certain, reduce inequality and unemployment. The negative overall effect on income could be compensated for part of the population by the impact on inequality. Since escaping from the rarities of resources (e.g. oil) reduces (or in an extreme case eliminates) the rents associated with those rarities, a reduction in inequality means in particular the primacy of work over property. This is how we can reconcile a reduction in inequality with the environmental transition. Less wealth is consumed, but there is less unemployment, provided that we take the opportunity offered by the environmental transition to reduce inequality, and not just by means of social tariffs but also by the creation of new production.

The third argument frequently advanced is the constraint of international competition. Since our competitors do not choose to respect the environment, their costs remain low. If we insist on burdening our companies with additional environmental costs (taxes, quotas, standards, right-to-pollute contracts), not only do we lose competitiveness and thereby destroy economic activity and employment, but furthermore, because these activities will be relocated to areas where pollution or CO2 emissions are "authorized", while the environmental degradation will not recur in our country, it will in others, and will thus ultimately increase. In short, the environmental ideal is incompatible with the harsh laws of globalization. Yet it is this argument that is deeply naive and off target, and not the environmental imperative. There are two types of possible answers, both fully compatible with globalization as it is now [little] regulated. The first involves cooperation through applying the same rules on larger and larger spaces. The European Union and its carbon market is one example. This space can be extended, as was tried by the

Kyoto Protocol or as is evidenced by the recent cooperation between the European Union and Australia. But such cooperation cannot be established on a stable basis if there is no possibility of coercion. The second possible answer is thus the environmental tax on imports, which is legitimate under the WTO agreements (protection of the environment is one of the few reasons for an exception to the principle of untaxed free trade). It should be noted, for there to be no doubt about the environmental motivation for this, that the proceeds of such import taxes should be redistributed at least in part to the countries sending the imports, or even reserved for environmental investments. This would remove any suspicion that this is a protectionist tax; it would help promote environmental issues in the developing countries; it would provide a concrete response to the notion of the North's ecological debt vis-à-vis the South; and it would be neutral when establishing an environmental tax system or a market for emissions rights in the countries concerned. It would also make it possible to retain an international division of labour (and the trade flows that go with it), which is a source of productivity and of a better allocation of capital that is still necessary to deal with all the constraints that we need to respect.

The environmental challenge and finding an exit to the crisis are issues that converge, not conflict. The first cannot be postponed without major costs or irreversible damage. The levers to act on the environment must be the same as those that will help put an end to the crisis, in particular because they reduce inequality and increase employment. There is still the issue of the public debt and the need for more manoeuvring room in the future. But submission to cash constraints ("I have to repay my debts right now or I'll collapse") amounts to the panic of a rabbit caught in the headlights of the car that is about to crush it. Yet this is exactly the kind of fiscal strategy that we are endeavouring to follow. And it is this that is inconsistent with the concern for future generations

and for the environment.

[1] Just like trying to become a little more competitive by exploiting shale gas because it is twice as cheap as average oil, while in the end, and despite the more advantageous ratio of energy to carbon emitted, it leads to more emissions.

[2] Subsequently, the environmental constraints will stimulate the technical progress that will ultimately raise our overall productivity again.

Friends of acronyms, here comes the OMT

By [Jérôme Creel](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

We had the OMD with its Orchestral Manœuvres in the Dark, and now the OMT with its Orchestral Manœuvres in the [liquidity] Trap, or more precisely, “Outright Monetary Transactions”, which is undoubtedly clearer. The OMT is a potentially effective mechanism that gives the European Central Bank (ECB) the means to intervene massively in the euro zone debt crisis so as to limit the differences between interest rates on euro zone government bonds. The possibility that a country that comes into conflict with its peers might leave the euro zone still exists, but if there is a common desire to preserve the euro then the ECB can intervene and play a role comparable to that of the central banks of other major states. Opening this door towards an escape route from the euro zone’s sovereign

debt crisis has given rise to great hope. Nevertheless, certain elements, such as conditionality, could quickly pose problems.

The OMT is simply a programme for the buyback of government bonds by the European Central Bank, like SMP 1.0 (the Securities Markets Programme) which it replaces but limited to States that are subject to a European Financial Stability Fund / European Stability Mechanism (EFSF / ESM) programme and thus benefiting from European conditional aid. For the ECB to intervene, the country concerned must first negotiate a macroeconomic adjustment plan with the European Commission and the European Council, and apply it. The ECB, potentially members of the European Parliament or the IMF can be a party to this (these institutions – the Commission, the ECB and the IMF – form the Troika of men in black, so famous and feared in Greece). Secondly, and more importantly, the country will be under the supervision of the Troika thereafter.

So if Italy and Spain want to benefit from the purchase of their bonds by the ECB, then their governments will have to submit to an EFSF or ESM adjustment programme. This does not necessarily imply that the plan imposed will be more drastic in terms of austerity than what these governments might have already devised or implemented (the doctrinaire approach in the management of public finances is highly contagious in Europe), but it will require the two countries to submit *ex ante* to outside scrutiny of any adjustment plan they develop and *ex post* to control by the Commission and the Council. If the country under surveillance starts *ex post* to veer away from implementing the adjustment plan, then it could, of course, withdraw from the programme, but its sovereign bonds would no longer be covered by OMTs. They would lose the support of their peers and would thus sail into the financial markets in uncharted waters. That would probably be the first step towards a default or an exit from the euro.

Furthermore, the ECB has not committed itself to absorbing all

the bonds issued and thus maintains a real threat capacity: if the country were to rebel, it could be obliged to face higher rates. The OMT thus introduces both a carrot (lower rates) and a stick (to let the rates rise, sell the bonds the ECB holds in its portfolio and thereby push rates upward), upon each new issue. The OMT is therefore akin to being put under direct control (conditionality) with progressive sanctions and an ultimate threat (exiting the programme).

The ECB says that its interventions will mainly cover medium-term securities (maturity between 1 and 3 years), without excluding longer-term maturities, and with no quantitative limits. Note that short / medium-term emissions *usually* represent a small proportion of total emissions, which tend to be for 10 years. However, in case of a crisis, intervention on short-term maturities provides a breath of fresh air, especially as maturing 10-year securities can be refinanced by 3-year ones. This gives the Troika additional leverage in terms of conditionality: the OMT commitment on securities is only for three years and must be renewed after three years. The financial relief for countries subject to the programme may be significant in the short term. For example, in 2012 Spain, which has not yet taken this step, will have issued around 180 billion euros of debt. If the OMT had reduced Spain's sovereign borrowing rates throughout 2012, the gain would have amounted to between 7 and 9 billion for the year (and this could be repeated in 2013 and 2014, at least). This is because, instead of a 10-year rate of 7%, Spain could be benefitting from the 2% rate at which France borrows for 10 years, or instead of its 4.3% rate at 3 years, Spain could have borrowed at 0.3% (France's 3-year sovereign rate). This is the maximum gain that can be expected from this programme, but it is significant: this roughly represents the equivalent of the budgetary impact of the recent VAT hike in Spain (or a little less than one Spanish GDP point). This would not alter Spain's fiscal situation definitively, but it would end the complete nonsense that saw Spaniards paying much more for

their debt to compensate their creditors for a default that they have been striving arduously not to trigger.

It can even be hoped (as can be seen in the easing of Spanish sovereign rates by almost one point following the ECB announcement on Thursday, 6 September 2012, or the almost half a point reduction in Italian rates) that the mere existence of this mechanism, even if Spain or Italy do not use it (and thus do not submit to control), will be enough to reassure the markets, to convince them that there will be no default or exit from the euro and therefore no justification for a risk premium.

The ECB announced that it would terminate its preferred creditor status for the securities. This provision, which had been intended to reduce the risk to the ECB, led to downgrading the quality of securities held outside the ECB and thus reducing the impact of ECB interventions on rates. By acquiring a government bond, the ECB shifted the risk onto the bonds held by the private sector, since in case of a default the Bank was a preferred creditor that took priority over private holders of bonds of the same type.

The ECB explained that its OMT operations will be fully sterilized (the impact on the liquidity in circulation will be neutral), which, if it is taken at its word, implies that other types of operations (purchases of private securities, lending to banks) will be reduced correspondingly. What do we make of this? The example of the SMP 1.0 can be drawn on in this regard. SMP 1.0 was indeed also accompanied by sterilization. This sterilization involved short-term deposits (1 week, on the ECB's liabilities side), allocated in an amount equal to the sums involved in the SMP (209 billion euros to date, on the ECB's assets side). Each week, the ECB therefore collects 209 billion euros in short-term fixed-term deposits. This is therefore a portion of bank deposits that the ECB assigns to the sterilization instrument, without there being sterilization in the strict sense (because this does not

prevent an increase in the size of the ECB's balance sheet nor does it reduce the potential liquidity in circulation). The mention of sterilization in the OMT appears to be an effort at presenting this in a way that can convince certain states, such as Germany, that this monetary policy will not be inflationary and therefore not contrary to the mandate imposed on the Bank by the Treaty on the European Union. Currently, and because the crisis remains unresolved, private banks have substantial deposits with the ECB (out of fear of entrusting these deposits to other financial institutions), which gives it considerable flexibility to prevent the announced sterilization from affecting the liquidity in circulation (the ECB has a little more than 300 billion euros in deposits that are not mobilized for sterilization). The ECB can then probably use the current accounts (by blocking them for a week), which poses no difficulty since the ECB lends to the banks on tap through long-term refinancing operations (LTROs). At worst, the ECB would lose money in the sterilization operation in case of a gap in compensation between the fixed-term deposits and the loans granted to banks. Sterilization could therefore lead to this kind of absurd accounting, but wind up, in a situation of monetary and financial crisis, having no impact on liquidity. On the other hand, if the situation normalizes, the constraint of sterilization would weigh more heavily. We're not there yet, but when we do get there, the ECB needs to limit lending to the economy or to accept an increase in liquidity if the OMT continues to be implemented for some euro zone members.

The deal that is now on the table places the euro zone countries in a formidable dilemma. On the one hand, acceptance of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance of the euro zone (TSCG) determines eligibility for the EFSF and the ESM [\[1\]](#), and therefore now determines eligibility for the OMT programme. Refusing to sign the fiscal treaty means rejecting in advance the potential intervention of the ECB, and thus accepting that the crisis continues until the breakup of the

euro zone or until a catastrophic default on a sovereign debt. On the other hand, signing the treaty means accepting the principle of an indiscriminately restrictive fiscal strategy (the rule on public debt reduction included in the TSCG will be devastating) that will trigger a recession in the euro zone in 2012 and perhaps in 2013.

Signing the treaty also means relieving the pressure of the markets, but only to wind up submitting solely to the Troika and to the baseless belief that the fiscal multipliers are low, that European households are Ricardian and that the sovereign debt is still holding back growth. It is true that lowering sovereign interest rates, particularly those of Italy and Spain, will create some breathing room. But the main gain from lower rates would be to spread the fiscal consolidation over a longer period of time. Interest rates place a value on time, and reducing them means granting more time. The debts contracted at negative real interest rates are not ordinary debts, and do not represent the same kind of burden as debts issued at prohibitively high rates.

It would be a terrible waste to gain new maneuvering room (the OMT) only to bind one's hands immediately (the TSCG and the Troika's blind fiscal strategy). Only a change in fiscal strategy would make it possible to take advantage of the door opened by the ECB. In short, saving the euro will not help if we do not first save the EU from the disastrous social consequences of fiscal blindness.

[\[1\]](#) Paragraph 5 of the preamble to the Treaty establishing the European Stability Mechanism states: "This Treaty and the TSCG are complementary in fostering fiscal responsibility and solidarity within the economic and monetary union. It is acknowledged and agreed that the granting of financial assistance in the framework of new programmes under the ESM will be conditional, as of 1 March 2013, on the ratification

of the TSCG by the ESM Member concerned and, upon expiration of the transposition period referred to in Article 3(2) TSCG on compliance with the requirements of that article.”

The crisis in the automobile industry: strategic shortcomings shouldn't conceal the impact of fiscal austerity

By [Jean-Luc Gaffard](#)

The crisis in the automobile industry, illustrated by the closure of the PSA site in Aulnay, reveals not only structural difficulties but also strategic errors made by the manufacturers with respect to their industrial organization and range positioning. The industry's need to restructure cannot, however, obscure the very real macroeconomic dimensions of the crisis in the short term.

New car registrations in France fell 15.5% in July on an annual basis, after adjusting for working days. In the first seven months of the year, the decline in the automotive market stood at 13.5% in unadjusted data and 14.1% in adjusted data. PSA was down 9.9% in July in terms of unadjusted data. The Renault group has seen its share of registrations fall by 11.2%, with a drop of 26.6% for the Renault brand but a near doubling of registrations for the low-cost Dacia brand. Also in July, the decline in new car sales in Spain accelerated, with a drop of 17.2%. In Italy, new car registrations

plummeted 21.4%. Finally, while German production increased by 5% due to exports, new car registrations there fell by 5%.

These catastrophic figures are first and foremost the result of the collapse of aggregate demand in the countries of the European Union as a result of falling revenues combined with greater inequality in distribution. The middle class is maintaining or increasing its savings rate and either deferring purchases in time or buying lower-cost products, particularly cars, while at the same time the increase in inequality has led to growth in the market for luxury vehicles, particularly in Europe and China.

It is not surprising, in this context, that PSA, which has a mid-range positioning, recorded a fall in sales and that Renault limited the damage only thanks to sales of its low-cost brand. Nor is it surprising to see strong growth for the Asian brands, Korean in particular, which are also positioned on the low-cost segment. Finally, it is not surprising that German manufacturers racked up exceptional results, as they are strongly positioned on the top of the range: BMW, Audi and Porsche recorded sales increases in the first half-year of 8%, 22.5% and 12.3%, respectively.

This state of affairs cannot of course absolve manufacturers of their strategic responsibilities, but it should lead the government to prioritize the underlying causes and, even more, to take the measure of what is needed in the short term, even while it continues to provide long-term support for the industry.

Nobody can doubt the relevance and effectiveness of the strategy adopted by Germany's firms, which is based on the international fragmentation of their production process, the conservation and development in the home country of their technological capacity and a better analysis of market expectations in the emerging economies, first of all China. This strategy proved to be especially successful as

competitive devaluations became impossible with the advent of the single currency, an impossibility that has wound up exposing the errors in the positioning of their French competitors, including PSA, in light of the reality of global markets. The intensified rivalry between firms due to the steady weakening in European domestic demand, which has recently accelerated, could only lead to widening gaps in performance in terms of sales volumes, market share and ultimately profit margins.

There is certainly no question but that the future of the French automobile industry requires a substantial effort at organizational and technological innovation together with the internationalization of production and the strengthening of local production relationships, as well as a search for market niches to make competition less price-sensitive. Public measures aimed at strengthening the production network through a site policy and support for outsourcing respond to this strategic challenge. The emphasis on the development of electric and hybrid vehicles is, however, questionable. The electric vehicle market could well remain marginal, and this will not change as a result of heavily subsidized prices to boost sales among specific urban groups. As for the market for hybrid vehicles, this is still limited in volume, and foreign (Japanese) competition already has a solid footing. Shouldn't we worry about the fate of mid-range vehicles: while their market is clearly suffering from the crisis in Europe, might it not thrive in Europe as it emerges from the crisis and even develop in the emerging economies as a genuine middle class emerges there? In other words, a productive recovery in the automotive sector, while it must involve improvements in quality, is still a matter of demand – and demand needs to be considered at a global level, with as a consequence the corresponding strategic choices concerning the location and segmentation of production activities.

In any event, a recovery in production in one direction or

another will take time, and time is likely to be lacking if in the short term there is no pick-up in demand. In other words, the immediate problem is as much if not more macroeconomic rather than microeconomic. The surest way to bury the French automotive industry, thus losing an important accumulation of human capital, is to pursue a fiscal austerity policy that merely depresses demand without addressing the issue of sovereign debt.

The situation on the labour market in France*

By [Eric Heyer](#)

The French economy is facing a number of imbalances, with the two main ones being:

- a public deficit that at end 2012 is likely to come to about 4.5 GDP points, or close to 100 billion euros;
- a lack of jobs, which is leading to mass unemployment.

While the first point is the object of great attention, and while it has been and remains the main or even the sole concern of every EU summit over the last three years and is at the heart of the European strategy on the crisis, it must be acknowledged that this is not unfortunately the case for the second point. However, it is not unreasonable to ask whether the priority in a country as rich as France should actually be to reduce the deficit at all costs even if this may worsen the plight of society's most vulnerable and make it more difficult

for them to access the labour market.

Since the beginning of the crisis in early 2008, the French economy has destroyed more than 300,000 jobs, and the number of unemployed as defined by the International Labour Office has increased by 755,000. More than 2,700,000 French are now without jobs, i.e. 9.6% of the active population.

And this figure undoubtedly underestimates the real situation. The French economy is currently creating only mini part-time jobs that don't last long; in the last quarter, 4.5 million job contracts were signed: 3 out of 4 of these were contracts lasting less than one month (mostly 1 day to 1 week). Someone who signed one of these contracts and is looking for a job at the end of the same month is not counted as unemployed. Their inclusion would increase the jobless numbers and push the French economy a little further into mass unemployment.

Moreover, and this is more disturbing, the unemployed are getting older while remaining jobless – the number of long-term unemployed is continuing to shoot upwards – and thereby lose out in terms of both job skills and financially as they shift from unemployment benefits onto the social minima; in a study we conducted at OFCE for the National Observatory on Poverty and Social Exclusion (ONPES), we estimated that in France 100 additional unemployed during this crisis will lead to 45 more people in poverty in 2012. Thus, even stabilizing unemployment would not lead to halting the deterioration of people's situation – on the contrary.

It is therefore urgent to reverse current trends with respect to employment and unemployment.

The surest way to do this is to put the French economy onto a trajectory of dynamic growth: recall that low but positive growth is not enough for the French economy to create jobs again, as, given gains in productivity, the country's economy needs to grow by more than 1% in order to unleash a spiral of

job creation. Moreover, given the continuation of demographic growth and the postponement of the retirement age, the labour force is increasing by 150,000 people every year. It is thus necessary to create more than 150,000 jobs in France before unemployment will begin to fall, which corresponds to growth of over 1.5%.

However, in light of the austerity policies being implemented in France and by our European partners, this level of growth seems unthinkable in 2012 and 2013.

So how can a further explosion of unemployment be stopped in the near future?

The first step would be to change Europe's strategy by establishing, among other things, a "more moderate" austerity.

The second step would be to adopt the strategy Germany is using for the crisis, that is to say, to reduce working time by massively resorting to part-time work and to partial unemployment schemes. Remember that 35% of German employees are hired part-time, as against 17% in France. Furthermore, during the crisis 1.6 million Germans have been on a partial unemployment programme, compared with 235,000 in France. All this has helped Germany to keep unemployment down during the crisis.

The last solution is to use what in France is called the "social treatment of unemployment". As the private sector is still destroying jobs, the public sector would offset part of this by creating subsidized jobs.

The government seems to be taking this last path: 100,000 "jobs for the future" will be created in 2013 and 50,000 in 2014.

In the short term, given the economic situation, this strategy seems to be the most effective and the least expensive. However, in the medium term, it cannot replace a policy of

growth.

* This text is taken from a series of reports by Eric Heyer for the programme “Les carnets de l'économie” on France Culture radio. It is possible to listen to the series on [France Culture](#).